

Letter from Mabel Hubbard Bell to Eliza Symonds Bell, March 21, with transcript

Letter from Mrs. Alexander Graham Bell to Mrs. Alexander Melville Bell. Florence, March 21st. (1892) My dear Mrs. Bell:

I am so sorry I have allowed your and Mr. Bell's most welcome letter to remain so long unanswered. I am not however as clever a correspondent as Mr. Bell makes out, and now that Alec is away I find that it is nearly as much as I can do to write to him as often as he will think I ought. I am so sorry you and Mr. Bell were not well, but hope he recovered before he went to New York. I have heard of his meeting Alec through Mr. Hitz.

You will have heard ere this reaches you of Elsie's diphtheria. The poor child has had more than her share of illness these last two years. I did hope that she had got through and was going to devote herself to getting thoroughly well and strong, and I cannot imagine where she can have taken the infection. The Misses Clark think she was not well when we returned here from Rome, and she was certainly over-fatigued and excited by the Carnival, but since our return she has steadily improved in every way, and I was very much encouraged. It is rather hard that this should be the result. She has had the disease in its mildest form I think, or has been very skillfully treated, for she has had absolutely no fever, and until today has suffered but very little inconvenience. Now however, I suppose that she is getting better and the disease breaking up she feels worse and is having a much harder time. I have a bright-faced, capable little Dominican nun as night nurse to relieve me. Elsie was so excited at having her last night that she lost half her night 's sleep, 2 and the poor child doesn't get much at best as she has to be roused every three hours to have her throat sprayed. Tonight she is more quiet, but not being so comfortable I am afraid she may not do much better.

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We have such kind friends here, and we could not be as well off anywhere else as if we were in your house or Mamma's. I should feel worried all the time because of the trouble and the fear of infection. Here Miss Clark is not afraid as she has had it and knows all about it, and though I cannot pay for her kindness, sympathy and encouragement, I can for what we use, and break. I go out to dine every afternoon for exactly two hours, between the two operations on Elsie's throat and though I never ask her I always find that she has spent the time reading to Elsie or ministering to her wants. Elsie has been very proud of having diphtheria, and has felt so perfectly well and comfortable that she has spent her time painting pictures, writing and ripping up a dress for the wash, so I have not hesitated to leave her. In this way Daisy and I have seen quite a good deal of the country outside the walls. This afternoon we ventured on a new departure. I ordered a phaeton and horse for my own driving with footman, and set out, but was rather dismayed when my poor one horse phaeton resolved itself into a high cart with two spirited ponies. However the day was too lovely to waste and the footman was close behind, so we climbed up and I gathered up the reins and off we started. We got along very nicely although as Daisy's Italian did not extend to asking which way to turn in passing it took me some time and experiment to find out. We were soon past the barriers where the customs officers sit at ease all day long and occasionally bestir themselves to take 3 their long dagger-like sticks and poke them through the wagon loads of hay to be sure that there are no contraband goods concealed inside, or stop the market wagons to levy toll. Beyond was a narrow straggling street of shabby stucco houses, and still further out the houses dropped off and only high stucco walls bordered the firm hard macadamized road. By and by all of a sudden we found the Arno flowing rapidly beside us, a most picturesque narrow stream full of the sharpest turns and twists over its pebbly bed and around the steep high conical terraced hills at either side. How this little river full of rapids which we left a broad slowly majestic slowly flowing stream right on the other side of Florence from the Piazza d' Azeglio, and apparently coming from exactly the opposite direction, came to be keeping company with our road I cannot imagine, but there it was and the fine hard road almost as broad as the river and divided from it by strong stone embankments and its

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companion travelled in and out among the picturesque hills and villages. And we drove on with immense satisfaction thinking each little city, village prettier than the last, and every castle crowned height the most romantic we had seen, until the setting sun warned us of the time and we turned homewards. Vallombrosa, most fascinating of names is only twelve miles further and says our footman so high that the last five miles is just up on end and three horses are necessary, so we decided that as soon as Elsie is well we must go there. We have only 8 bottles of liquor, samples of the manufacture of three convents, and we can't think of going home without making up the dozen!

My little nun thinks I have written enough and that it is time I went to bed, so I will say Good night especially as she has 4 to go to Mass at seven tomorrow morning and I must be up to take her place. All these nuns do look so happy, it is really a contrast beside the careworn looks of most of the people here. Her spotless white gown too with the beautifully starched white collar and black veil is most picturesque and becoming.

Much love to you all, Always affectionately, Your daughter, Mabel.